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## Transforming Saudi Arabia's workforce: HR management strategies in action

Khaled A. Z. Alyamani

*Applied College, Abqaiq Branch, King Faisal University, Al-Ahsa 31982, Saudi Arabia.*

(Email: [kalyamani@kfu.edu.sa](mailto:kalyamani@kfu.edu.sa))

### Abstract

This research seeks to explore the role of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 in transforming the workforce through human resource management strategies. The study focuses on how this vision affects policy renewal and the development of the work environment in line with a diversified knowledge-based economy. As for the design and methodology, this research paper relied on a descriptive methodology based on studying current literature and government reports, in addition to analyzing secondary data related to human resources in the Kingdom. The focus was on strategies such as digital transformation in human resources while enhancing Saudization and developing national skills, in addition to considering the role of international partnerships, such as cooperation with the International Labor Organization. The results of the study showed that Vision 2030 has resulted in significant development in the human resources sector in Saudi Arabia, as digital technologies have been adopted in employee management and there has been a significant increase in women's participation in the workforce. It was also shown that localization and continuous training programs have contributed to bridging skills gaps and achieving sustainable growth in the local market. The results also indicate that Vision 2030 is not just an economic plan, but rather a comprehensive transformation that reshapes the labor market in the Kingdom. The study indicates that challenges related to skills, adapting to automation, and changing workforce expectations still exist. Saudi Arabia's investments in human capital are expected to contribute to achieving sustainability and sustainable growth in the future. As for the scientific implications of this study, it emphasizes the importance of adopting effective strategies in human resources management, such as activating digital solutions, enhancing women's participation, and developing local skills. Companies and institutions in the Kingdom must also focus on innovation, providing continuous training, and strengthening partnerships between the public and private sectors to ensure success in achieving the goals of Vision 2030 and achieving a positive transformation in the workforce in a sustainable manner.

**Keywords:** Digital HR innovation, Saudization initiatives, Strategic HR management, Vision 2030, Workforce transformation.

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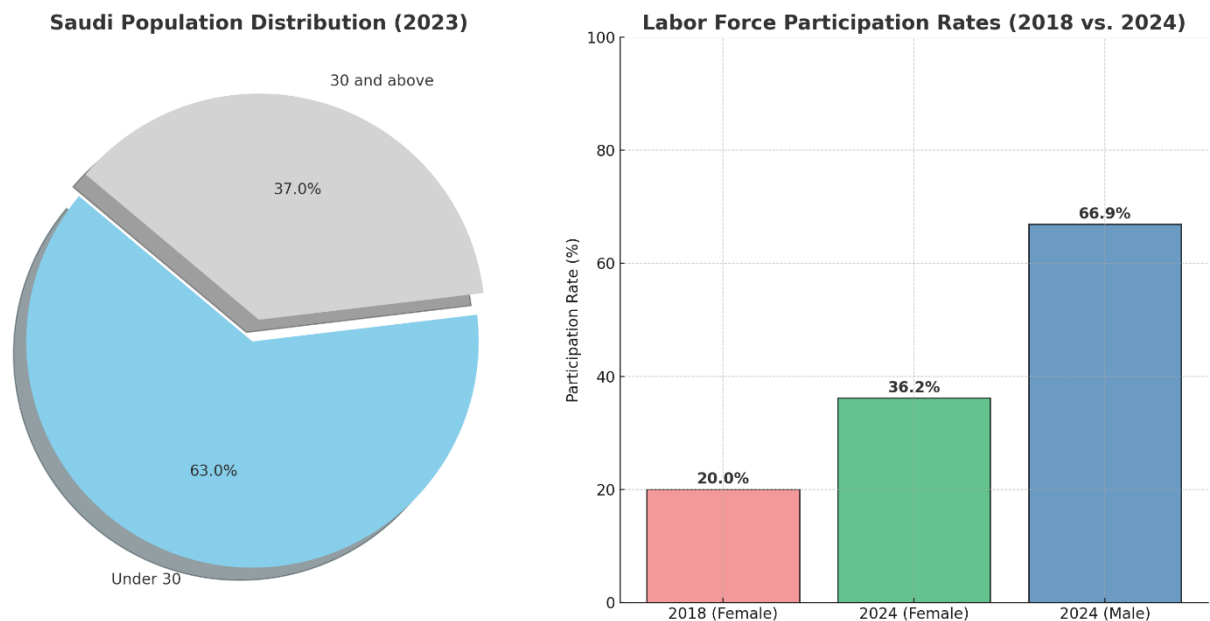
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## 1. Introduction

As part of a wider economic and social transformation, Saudi Arabia has launched an ambitious program through Vision 2030, a strategic framework that seeks to diversify the oil-reliant economy and facilitate the path towards sustainable development. The nation's workforce transformation, with a focus on strengthening human capital, boosting workforce participation, and stimulating innovation through focused human resource (HR) management strategies, is one of the key pillars of this vision. With evolving labor market dynamics and economic reforms, there needs to be a paradigm shift in HR practices to address challenges like skill mismatches, low female participation, and high youth unemployment. The Saudi labor market has historically been characterized by a dual-structure economy, wherein a dependence on foreign workers exists alongside an increasingly large and under-productive local workforce. The country has long relied on foreign workers at the expense of national workers, increasing the urgency of workforce localization solutions like Nitaqat, a Saudization scheme from the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development (MHRSD) designed to raise the number of jobs available to citizens. With a young population and transition of work in Saudi Arabia, the country is undergoing massive transformation. In 2023, Saudi Arabia had a population of 32.2 million, and 63% of Saudi nationals were under the age of 30 [1]. This youthful demographic presents both opportunities and challenges for the Kingdom's economic development. In recent years, Saudi Arabia has made notable strides in increasing female participation in the workforce. The labor force participation rate for Saudi women rose from 20% in late 2018 to 35% by the end of 2022 [2]. Those numbers continued to rise in 2024, with women accounting for 36.2% of the third-quarter total. Still, the gap is wide, with male participation at 66.9% during the same period. This upward trend continued to 2024, as female participation in the third quarter reached 36.2%. A significant gender gap still exists, though, and male participation was 66.9% in the same period [3].



**Figure 1.**

Reflects the continued growth in women's participation in the Saudi labor market, highlighting the gender gap in participation.

HRM in Saudi Arabia is undergoing a significant transformation process because of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 initiative, which aims at diversifying and modernizing the economy. This ambitious transformation puts human capital at the center of the Kingdom's prosperity, thus requiring the evolution of HRM practices to address new needs and opportunities [4]. In a constantly evolving environment, it is essential for HR professionals to keep up with the latest trends to develop a high-performing workforce [3]. One significant trend is the emphasis on employee autonomy and empowerment, where HR functions are becoming more self-service through digital platforms. This allows employees to handle their attendance, leave requests, and other routine tasks on their own. This change not only improves operational efficiency but also empowers employees, leading to greater job satisfaction and productivity [5]. However, the journey comes with its own set of challenges. Change fatigue is a major issue, with 72% of Saudi employees feeling its effects as they adjust to the swift changes in their organizations. HR departments are essential in tackling this by promoting clear communication, delivering focused training, and supplying stress management resources to assist employees in navigating the shifting environment [6]. Moreover, strategic human resource management (SHRM) has gained prominence as companies recognize the need to align HR strategies with core business objectives [7]. Attracting top talent is a significant challenge, particularly in the competitive job market of Saudi Arabia. As the nation works to diversify its economy, the need for skilled professionals increases, making it essential for companies to enhance their strategies for acquiring and retaining talent [8].

Self-service HR portals have significantly changed workforce management in Saudi Arabia by boosting employee engagement and satisfaction. These platforms provide a centralized space for employees to access and manage their HR information, including updating personal details, viewing pay stubs, requesting time off, and enrolling in benefits. This transition has empowered employees to take charge of their HR needs, greatly streamlining processes and enhancing organizational efficiency. The rise of HR software and self-service portals in Saudi Arabia has been fueled by the necessity

to tackle challenges in HR operations that can hinder company growth. Consequently, the demand for HR software in the region has surged, with the market projected to grow at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 8.38%. This growth indicates a growing acceptance and use of HR management systems (HRMS) that simplify and automate HR tasks [6]. In today's digital age, self-service HR portals have become vital elements of modern workplaces. These systems empower employees by equipping them with tools to manage their HR-related tasks and access pertinent information, fostering a sense of ownership and autonomy. This empowerment is essential in a rapidly changing work environment where efficiency, flexibility, and independence are highly prized. HR software in Saudi Arabia is crucial for enhancing employee engagement and satisfaction by streamlining administrative tasks, such as onboarding, which can now be done online. This automation not only saves time but also helps new employees quickly familiarize themselves with essential information. By alleviating the administrative load on HR departments, self-service portals allow HR professionals to concentrate on more strategic initiatives, further improving organizational efficiency and employee satisfaction. The significance of self-service HR portals is highlighted by the strong focus on digital transformation in Saudi Arabia's rapidly growing economy [9]. Vision 2030 is a comprehensive initiative aimed at diversifying Saudi Arabia's economy and reducing its dependence on oil. A key aspect of this vision is the creation of a strong and competitive workforce, which requires aligning human resources practices with national objectives. HR leaders in Saudi Arabia are now responsible for promoting a culture of continuous learning, innovation, and adaptability to ensure that the workforce possesses the essential skills and knowledge [6].

A major element of Vision 2030 is the Saudization policy, designed to boost the employment of Saudi nationals in the private sector. While this initiative is vital for creating local jobs, it also presents several challenges for employers. Finding and developing local talent to meet the needs of various industries is a complex endeavor that demands strategic HR management. To tackle these challenges, organizations are increasingly focusing on upskilling and reskilling their employees to close the skills gap created by rapid technological changes [7].

This article explores the changing landscape of HR management in Saudi Arabia by highlighting key strategies, policies, and practices that are driving workforce transformation. It examines how human resource management frameworks can promote sustainable economic growth through talent optimization, capacity building, and innovative work practices. The discussion also looks at the impact of technological advancements, the emergence of artificial intelligence (AI), and digital transformation on employment models and HR functions. Lastly, the article offers recommendations for cultivating an adaptive, inclusive, and future-ready workforce.

### *1.1. Vision 2030 and its Impact On HRM*

Under the leadership of King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, and His Royal Highness Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz, Crown Prince and Prime Minister, Saudi Arabia introduced Vision 2030 in 2016. This ambitious initiative aims to harness the Kingdom's unique strengths, such as its significant role in the Arab and Islamic worlds, robust investment potential, and strategic geographical location. Vision 2030 is a comprehensive strategy designed to diversify the economy, empower citizens, foster a vibrant environment for both local and international investors and position Saudi Arabia as a global leader [10]. Announced on April 25, 2016, by the Saudi government, the vision is led by the Council of Economic and Development Affairs (CEDA), which oversees the identification and monitoring of the necessary mechanisms and measures for its execution. Vision 2030 revolves around three main themes: a vibrant society, a thriving economy, and an ambitious nation. These themes form the foundation of the Kingdom's long-term objectives and reform strategies aimed at achieving economic success, including subsidy reductions, the establishment of a sovereign wealth fund, partial privatization of Saudi Aramco, and reforms across various sectors like tourism and defense [11].

One of the key aspects of Vision 2030 is its phased approach, with each stage lasting five years and building on the achievements of the previous phase. The first phase laid the foundation by implementing structural and comprehensive reforms in the public sector, the economy, and society. The vision leverages the Kingdom's deep cultural heritage, substantial investment capabilities, and strategic geographic location at the crossroads of three continents, which positions Saudi Arabia as a unique and influential player on the global stage [10]. A key feature of Vision 2030 is its phased approach, with each stage spanning five years and building on the successes of the previous phase. The first phase established the groundwork by implementing structural and comprehensive reforms in the public sector, economy, and society. The vision capitalizes on the Kingdom's rich cultural heritage, significant investment capabilities, and strategic location at the crossroads of three continents, positioning Saudi Arabia as a unique and influential player on the global stage. This strategic plan also focuses on reducing reliance on oil revenues by diversifying into non-oil industries, promoting tourism, enhancing education and healthcare, and empowering women. The initiatives and programs under this vision are designed to promote economic growth, social development, and cultural exchange, preparing Saudi citizens and residents for a brighter future and establishing the Kingdom as a major global player [12].

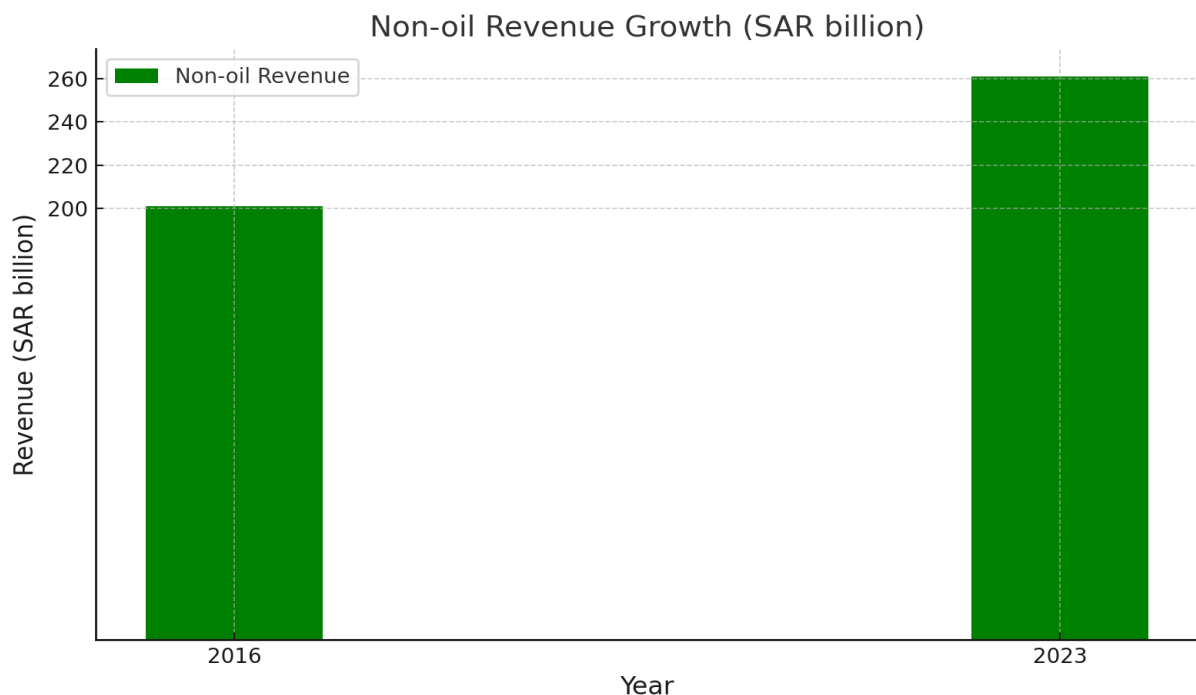
A key element of this vision is the emphasis on diversifying the economy away from its traditional reliance on oil revenues, aiming to establish Saudi Arabia as a global leader in sectors like tourism, technology, renewable energy, and entertainment. This shift brings both significant opportunities and challenges for human resource management, especially in attracting international talent [11]. The rapid economic diversification and the creation of new companies under the Public Investment Fund (PIF) have resulted in a heightened demand for skilled professionals. In the past five years, PIF has generated around 400,000 jobs, with plans to create an additional 1.8 million jobs over the next five years [13]. However, attracting international talent to fill these roles requires navigating various challenges, such as cultural differences and adherence to international labor standards. Understanding cultural nuances is crucial for building connections and fostering positive relationships with international talent. Respectful communication, appropriate dress, and awareness of social hierarchies are

vital for cultivating a supportive working environment. Additionally, businesses must effectively tackle talent and people-related challenges to drive economic diversification and meet the objectives of Vision 2030 [14].

A commitment to environmental and social sustainability is also essential for attracting international talent. Saudi Arabia's leadership has adopted data-driven decision-making to ensure the sustainability and resilience of their organizations, aligning with the goals of expanding the private sector, creating new industries, and promoting green initiatives. This alignment with global sustainability standards can make Saudi companies more appealing to international professionals [15]. The implementation of Saudization, which seeks to boost the involvement of Saudi nationals in the private sector, introduces additional challenges. Companies need to modify their talent acquisition strategies to attract and retain both Saudi and international talent. As the focus shifts towards economic diversification and the development of a knowledge-based economy, it becomes essential to identify and attract individuals who possess the skills and qualifications needed for this transition [16].

### 1.2. Economic Transformation Initiatives of Vision 2030

Vision 2030 is a groundbreaking plan for economic and social reform that seeks to lessen Saudi Arabia's reliance on oil, diversify its economy, and enhance various public service sectors, including health, education, infrastructure, recreation, and tourism. A significant initiative under Vision 2030 is the Saudi Green Initiative (SGI), which is a bold national effort aimed at addressing climate change, enhancing the quality of life, and safeguarding the environment for future generations. Launched in 2021 by His Royal Highness Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz, Crown Prince and Prime Minister, SGI is a comprehensive initiative that brings together all sustainability efforts in the country to rapidly advance the Kingdom's climate action. SGI aligns with Saudi Arabia's goal of achieving net-zero emissions by 2060 through the Circular Carbon Economy approach and is expediting the nation's shift towards a green economy. The initiative is driven by three main objectives: reducing emissions, increasing afforestation, and protecting land and sea [17]. Economic diversification has also been a vital aspect of Vision 2030. Since its inception, non-oil revenue has experienced significant growth, rising by 30% from SAR 201 billion in 2016 to SAR 261 billion in 2023 [18].



**Figure 2.**

This bar chart represents the non-oil revenue growth under Vision 2030 since the year 2016 till 2023.

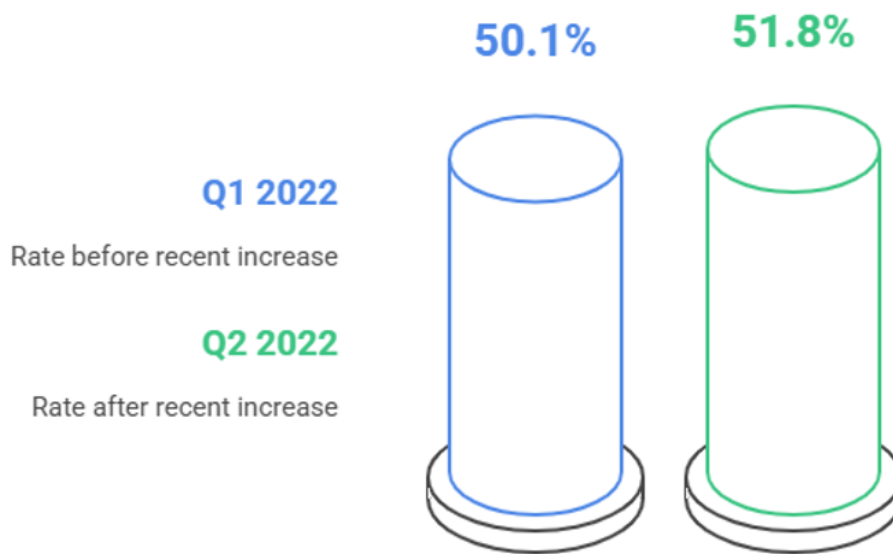
This growth has been supported by the implementation of new taxes, fees, and various efforts to diversify the economy. The introduction of Value Added Tax (VAT) in 2018, along with several fiscal reforms, has notably increased non-oil revenue. Furthermore, the Public Investment Fund (PIF) has been crucial in the economic transformation outlined in Vision 2030. By investing in key sectors and projects, the PIF aims to diversify the Kingdom's economy and encourage growth in multiple industries. These initiatives are designed not only to enhance economic performance but also to create job opportunities and improve the overall quality of life for Saudi citizens. Through these efforts, Vision 2030 aspires to establish a more sustainable and resilient economy that relies less on oil revenues and is better equipped to adapt to global economic changes.

### 1.3. Employee Engagement Strategies

Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 has had a profound impact on employee engagement strategies in the Kingdom, creating an environment that promotes greater employee satisfaction and productivity. Launched by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in 2016, the Vision 2030 initiative seeks to reduce the economy's reliance on oil and encourage sustainable growth across various sectors [19]. This ambitious plan aims to modernize the economy, enhance the quality of life, and elevate the Kingdom's position on the global stage. A vital aspect of Vision 2030 is the Saudization program, which promotes the hiring of Saudi nationals and strives to build a sustainable and inclusive economy. In response to this initiative, businesses in Saudi Arabia have increasingly focused on employee engagement strategies to cultivate a motivated and efficient workforce. This includes the adoption of updated legal and investment frameworks designed to stimulate private-sector activity and attract foreign investment [20].

Additionally, the Kingdom has experienced an increase in labor force participation, indicating a growing workforce eager to support the nation's economic objectives. According to the General Authority for Statistics, the labor force participation rate reached 51.8% in the second quarter of 2022, up from 50.1% in the previous quarter [21].

### Labor Force Participation Rate Q1 vs Q2 2022



**Figure 3.**

The bar chart shows the labor force participation rate in Saudi Arabia for the first two quarters of 2022, using data from the General Authority for Statistics.

In the first quarter of 2022, the participation rate was 50.1%. By the second quarter, it rose to 51.8%, marking an increase of 1.7 percentage points from the previous quarter. This upward trend highlights the progress Saudi Arabia is making in boosting workforce participation, which aligns with its broader Vision 2030 objectives aimed at creating more employment opportunities and enhancing economic involvement among its citizens. The chart effectively illustrates the comparison between the two quarters, showcasing the consistent improvement.

The 2024 Workplace Culture Report highlights that over two-thirds of employees in Saudi Arabia express pride in their work and companies, aligning with the goals of Vision 2030. The report emphasizes the importance of recognition, accountability, and achievement in shaping workplace culture, which are critical factors in driving organizational success. Employers in Saudi Arabia are investing in digital skills training and other upskilling initiatives to equip the workforce with the necessary skills for the future [22]. This focus on workforce development aligns with the economic and social pillars of Vision 2030, aiming to create a strong and capable workforce that can thrive in a diversified economy. The Hopes and Fears survey of 2022 indicates a positive trend, with both employers and employees working towards these ambitious goals, reflecting a robust engagement strategy within the Kingdom [23].

### 1.4. Impact of 2030 Vision on Human Resource Management

Vision 2030 has significantly influenced Human Resource Management (HRM) in Saudi Arabia, leading to important changes in workforce development, employment practices, and labor market regulations. Launched in 2016, the Kingdom's Vision 2030 initiative seeks to reduce dependence on oil revenues, improve the quality of life, and position Saudi Arabia as a global economic leader [20]. This transformative approach has prompted a comprehensive reassessment and modernization of HRM practices throughout the nation. A key focus of Vision 2030 is to foster a more dynamic and competitive workforce. The Human Capability Development Program (HCDP), introduced by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, plays a crucial role in this vision. The HCDP aims to empower Saudi citizens by providing them with the skills needed to compete both locally and internationally. This program is built on three main pillars: establishing a strong educational foundation, preparing the workforce for future labor market needs, and encouraging lifelong learning opportunities. Initiatives include expanding



early childhood education, providing career guidance and counseling, and implementing upskilling and reskilling programs to boost employability [24]. To support these goals, Saudi Arabia has introduced significant changes to its labor laws aimed at better-protecting workers and aligning employment practices with Vision 2030 objectives. Announced in August 2024 and set to take effect in February 2025, these amendments include improved worker protection, increased employer responsibilities, and well-defined frameworks for employment contracts. The intention behind these changes is to foster a fairer and more transparent labor market, which will encourage both local and expatriate talent to engage in the Kingdom's expanding economy [25]. Additionally, the focus of Vision 2030 on economic diversification has prompted the restructuring of various economic cities and the establishment of special zones to attract foreign investment and talent. By deregulating the energy sector and privatizing government services, Saudi Arabia seeks to cultivate a more competitive and sustainable economic landscape. These initiatives are anticipated to create a variety of job opportunities and promote a culture of ambition and growth among Saudis [26].

The Saudization program, designed to boost the employment of Saudi nationals in the private sector, is a vital part of Vision 2030. Recently, this program has gained more focus, with several reforms implemented to guarantee that Saudi citizens are fairly represented in the workforce. At the same time, it aims to make the Kingdom a more appealing place for foreign investors and skilled professionals. As a result of these reforms, the HR landscape has been transformed, allowing both local and expatriate workers to flourish [27].

### *1.5. HR Management Strategies for Workforce Transformation*

Since the launch of Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia has undergone significant changes that have redefined life in the Kingdom. This remarkable transformation is partly fueled by the National Transformation Program, initiated in 2016 as the first Vision Realization Program under Vision 2030. The program is dedicated to achieving strategic goals such as empowering the private sector, enhancing government performance, and fostering economic partnerships, all aimed at establishing Saudi Arabia as a leading nation [28].

As the Kingdom reshapes its economy and aspirations under Vision 2030, there is a strong emphasis on its youth, who make up 63 percent of the population according to 2023 data from the General Authority for Statistics. The government and private sector are joining forces through public-private partnerships, targeted training, and innovative programs to prepare a new generation of skilled professionals who will drive growth and reshape the economic landscape [29]. Technology is vital in this national transformation, especially in advancing workforce development through digital excellence (DEX). With over 92% of public entities achieving advanced levels of innovation or integration, DEX has become essential for attracting and retaining top local talent, indicating a shift in how organizations are positioning themselves as desirable employers for the Kingdom's evolving workforce [30]. The vision for the future Saudi labor market is one that is vibrant, inclusive, resilient, and founded on shared respect and mutual prosperity. The Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development (MHRSD) is dedicated to creating a dynamic ecosystem where both employers and employees can flourish, offering opportunities for all segments of society, including women, youth, and individuals with disabilities [31]. Human Resource Management (HRM) plays a crucial role in the success of organizations in Saudi Arabia, which is currently undergoing significant economic reforms as part of Vision 2030. This transformation necessitates the evolution of HRM practices to prioritize human capital as a key to success. It is essential for businesses to understand best practices and tackle challenges in HRM to thrive in this ever-changing environment. In this context, strategic human resource management (SHRM) is particularly important, as it aligns HR functions with core business objectives to enhance workplace efficiency and provide companies with a competitive edge in the market [4].

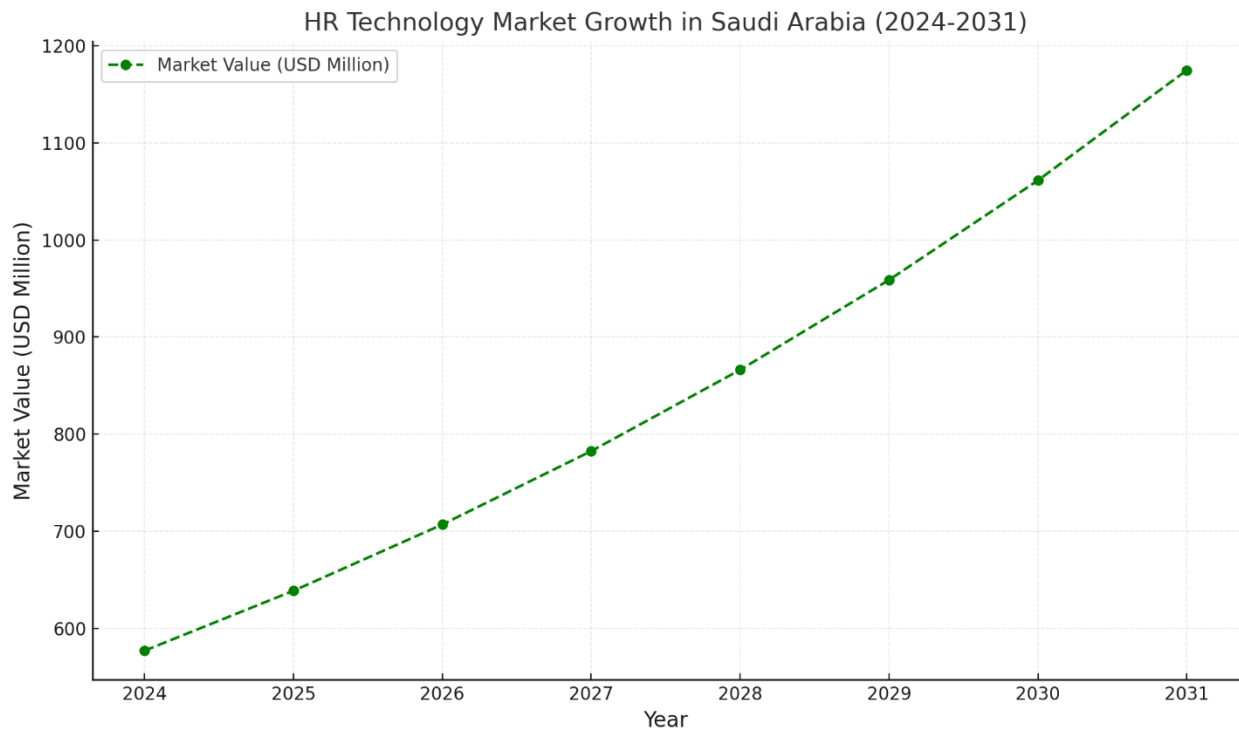
### *1.6. Digital Transformation in HR*

In today's fast-changing global digital landscape, every nation is eager to lead in innovation and growth. The term 'Digital Transformation' is widely recognized, and few countries are as dedicated to this goal as Saudi Arabia. Central to their ambitious Vision 2030 is the aim to not only revamp their economy but also reshape their workforce. This vision highlights the importance of digitizing the workforce, particularly as modern technologies and methods are set to redefine traditional roles, boost efficiency, and drive organizations into the future [22].

As the workplace in Saudi Arabia evolves, propelled by rapid technological advancements and changing workforce dynamics, Human Resources (HR) professionals are taking the lead in adopting innovative strategies to remain competitive. The integration of digital transformation in HR has become essential, with organizations utilizing these advancements to achieve success [23]. Saudi Arabia's dedication to innovation and technology has sped up the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) across various sectors, including HR. Once heavily dependent on manual processes and human judgment, the HR field is now transforming with AI technologies being incorporated into recruitment practices. This change aligns with the country's goal of fostering a knowledge-based economy and attracting top talent across different industries. AI is fundamentally altering how companies in Saudi Arabia handle recruitment, such as through automated resume screening, which greatly improves recruitment efficiency [32].

The digital transformation in HR has led to the rise of cloud-based HR solutions. Traditional HR methods, which often involve tedious paperwork and manual data entry, are being replaced by more efficient processes thanks to cloud technology. These solutions enable businesses to centralize their data storage, automate workflows, and provide remote access. From recruitment to performance management, cloud HR platforms improve agility and scalability, allowing HR departments to quickly adapt to evolving business needs [33]. The HR technology market in Saudi Arabia is experiencing significant growth, fueled by Vision 2030 initiatives, increased ICT spending, and a young, tech-savvy workforce. Recent estimates indicate that

the Saudi HR Tech Market is projected to reach USD 1.03 billion by 2031, with a strong CAGR of 10.70% from its 2024 value of USD 576.8 million [25].

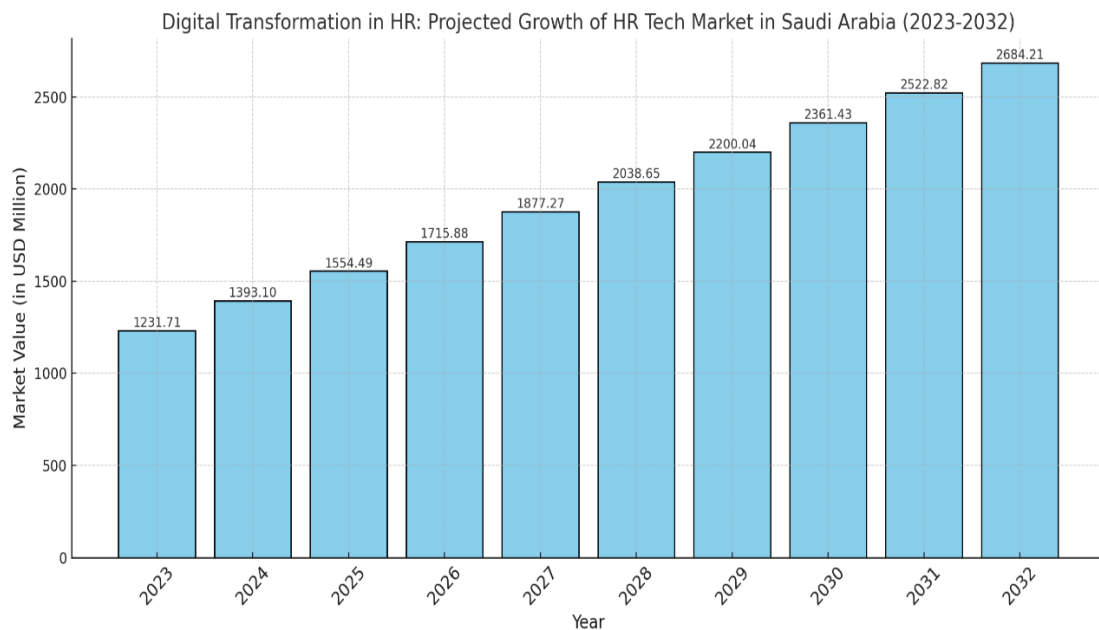


**Figure 4.**

This graph depicts the growth of the HR Technology market in Saudi Arabia from 2024 to 2031. It highlights a consistent upward trend, indicating an expected increase in market value from USD 576.8 million in 2024 to USD 1.03 billion by 2031, with a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 10.70%.

Annual events like the HR TECH Saudi Summit have been crucial in driving this change. The 8th Annual HR TECH Saudi Summit, themed “Explainable AI (XAI): The Evolution of Talent and Technology,” has sparked innovation in the Kingdom’s HR sector, encouraging meaningful discussions and collaborative efforts [34].

The digital transformation of HR in Saudi Arabia is truly exciting, with Vision 2030 fueling this transition. The HR tech market is projected to soar from USD 1,231.71 million in 2023 to USD 2,684.21 million by 2032, achieving a CAGR of 9.25% [35].



**Figure 5.**

This stacked bar chart illustrates estimated the projected growth of the HR tech market in Saudi Arabia from USD 1,231.71 million in 2023 to USD 2,684.21 million by 2032.

### **1.7. Government Initiatives**

Under Vision 2030, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has launched various government initiatives aimed at transforming the workforce, with a strong focus on public-private partnerships (PPPs). These partnerships are strategic, long-term collaborations between the government and private organizations designed to develop, manage, and maintain public infrastructure and services. Typically, the private sector takes on the responsibility of financing and overseeing projects, recouping investments through user fees or contractual payments from the government [36].

A significant component of Vision 2030 is the Privatization Program, which seeks to empower the private sector by granting access to government assets and improving service delivery. This initiative is intended to provide higher quality services, achieve cost efficiencies, promote economic diversity and growth, and enhance the Kingdom's competitiveness. By transferring the responsibility for service provision to the private sector, the government can focus on its core role of establishing laws and regulations that foster innovation and growth [37].

Additionally, Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 highlights the necessity of cultivating a supportive business environment to increase the private sector's contribution to the economy. Economic reforms have been introduced to improve the quality, efficiency, and digitization of services offered to the private sector. Furthermore, a variety of programs, initiatives, funds, incubators, and accelerators have been established to help the private sector navigate challenges and unlock its potential as the primary engine of the Kingdom's economy [38]. The National Centre for Privatization (NCP) has introduced a new pipeline for public-private partnership (PPP) projects, targeting various sectors such as transportation, energy, water, sanitation, and urban infrastructure. This initiative is intended to enhance efficiency, boost productivity, and create job opportunities for nationals within the private sector [39]. Additionally, the Saudi government has been proactive in seeking international partnerships to aid its workforce transformation objectives. During the Global AI Summit in September 2022, Saudi ministries and authorities established approximately 40 partnerships and agreements with Western private sector companies, including Intel, IBM, and ISACA. These collaborations aim to utilize global expertise and technology to advance the Kingdom's ambitious Vision 2030 objectives [30].

## **2. International Collaboration**

### **2.1. Collaboration with the International Labour Organization**

Saudi Arabia has been a member of the International Labour Organization (ILO) since 1976 and has ratified 19 ILO Conventions, including seven of the ten core Conventions. The collaboration between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the ILO is currently in its second phase of the Development Cooperation Program. This program emphasizes important areas such as employment policy, skills development, occupational safety and health, social dialogue, fundamental principles and rights at work, and the growth of cooperatives [40].

The Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development (MHRSD) of Saudi Arabia envisions a vibrant, inclusive, and resilient labor market that provides opportunities for all segments of society, including women, young people, and individuals with disabilities. This vision is in line with the ILO's goals of promoting decent work and social justice [31]. In June 2023, the MHRSD and the ILO signed a letter of intent to further their joint development program's second phase. This partnership is designed to assist the Ministry in analysis, policymaking, and capacity building, ensuring that these initiatives are in harmony with the Kingdom's Vision 2030 [41]. To evaluate and track the progress of this collaboration, the ILO Regional Director for Arab States, Ruba Jaradat, visited Saudi Arabia to meet with representatives from the government, employers, and workers. During her visit, she participated in the Islamic Development Bank Group Annual Meetings in Jeddah and engaged with key stakeholders in Riyadh, including Vice Minister for Human Resources, Abdullah Abuthnain [42]. Further discussions on the implementation of the technical cooperation project took place in November 2023 in Riyadh. A delegation from the ILO Regional Office for the Arab States, headed by Deputy Regional Director Peter Rademaker, participated in these meetings. Representatives from the MHRSD and the Family Affairs Council were also present, and the discussions centered on reviewing progress and evaluating reports related to the project [43].

### **2.2. ILO Initiatives in Saudi Arabia 2023**

In [International Labour Organization \[41\]](#) has been working closely with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) to promote decent work standards and social justice as part of the country's evolving human resources management strategies. As a G20 member, Saudi Arabia has ratified 19 ILO Conventions, including eight core ones, demonstrating its commitment to upholding international labor standards. The Kingdom has made significant strides in fostering a modern economy and a labor market that creates decent and productive job opportunities, especially for its nationals and women. The Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development has taken the lead in these initiatives, driving efforts to improve employment outcomes across Saudi Arabia. This includes the formulation and implementation of the Saudi Labour Market strategy, which features a range of programs, strategies, and plans designed to promote decent work for everyone [44]. Through this partnership, the ILO and the Saudi government are collaborating to develop a more inclusive and efficient labor market, in line with the broader objectives of workforce transformation in the country.

### **2.3. Localization Initiatives (Saudization)**

The Saudization Program, also known as the Saudi Nationalization Scheme, is a strategic initiative that the Saudi government launched in 1985 to boost the employment of Saudi nationals in the private sector. This program was created in response to high unemployment rates among locals and the Kingdom's heavy dependence on foreign labor, which has historically made up a large part of the workforce. It has gained particular significance as it aligns with the broader objectives of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 initiative, which aims to diversify the economy and strengthen the private sector's role in job



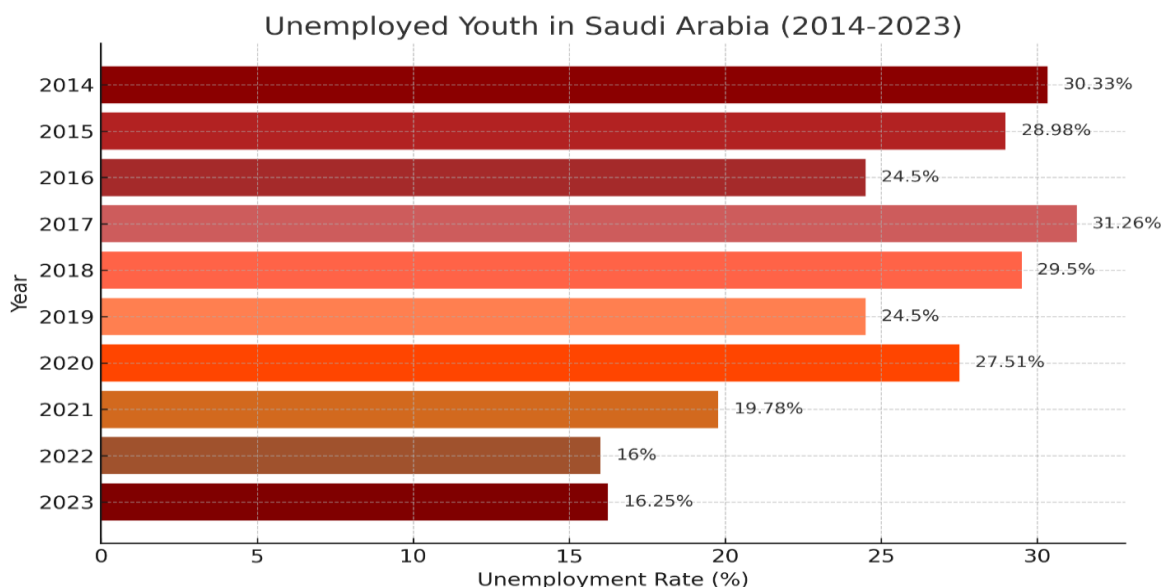
creation and economic sustainability [45]. The Saudization Program features several measures, with the Nitaqat system being the most prominent. This system categorizes companies based on the percentage of Saudi workers they employ, encouraging compliance through various incentives and penalties. As a result, businesses are motivated to hire more Saudi nationals to keep their operations running smoothly [46]. Over the years, statistics indicate that by 2020, around 31% of the total private sector workforce was made up of Saudi nationals, showing a steady increase since the program began [47]. However, challenges remain, including a significant skills mismatch between the education of Saudi workers and the demands of the labor market, along with ongoing economic pressures intensified by policies like the expatriate levy aimed at increasing fiscal revenues [36]. The implementation of the program has sparked some controversy. Critics contend that the strict employment quotas could lead to unintended economic repercussions, such as workforce shortages in sectors that rely heavily on expatriate labor and higher operational costs for businesses.

The program has come under scrutiny for its effectiveness in tackling the high unemployment rates among university graduates, many of whom possess degrees in fields that do not align with market demand [25]. These complexities highlight the careful balance the Saudi government must strike in transforming its labor market while ensuring sustainable economic growth and social stability. In summary, the Saudization Program is a crucial initiative by the Saudi government aimed at empowering its national workforce and reducing reliance on foreign labor. As the program adapts to ongoing economic challenges and demographic changes, its results will have a significant impact on the future of the Saudi economy and its labor market dynamics, making it a vital topic of discussion and debate [38].

As of 2024, the Saudi government has established ambitious goals for Saudization across various sectors. For instance, in the healthcare sector, recent initiatives aim to localize health professions by 60% and medical device professions by 30% [36]. Furthermore, the MHRSD has reported a roughly 30% increase in the employment of Saudi nationals in the private sector from 2020 to 2023, underscoring the program's success in generating job opportunities for locals [25].

According to Statista Research Department 2024, the youth unemployment rate in Saudi Arabia has seen significant fluctuations from 2014 to 2023, mirroring broader economic trends and labor market reforms during this time. In 2014, the unemployment rate among young people was notably high at 30.33%, reflecting challenges in job creation and workforce participation. Although there was a slight improvement in 2015, with the rate decreasing to 28.98%, it remained a critical issue. In 2016, unemployment fell further to 24.5%, likely due to early labor market reforms and economic adjustments. However, this progress was short-lived, as the unemployment rate surged to its highest level in the dataset, reaching 31.26% in 2017. This sharp increase may have been influenced by structural changes in the labor market, economic pressures, and the early impacts of Vision 2030 policies that sought to reshape the workforce and diversify the economy.

Following this peak, youth unemployment gradually declined, with the rate dropping to 29.5% in 2018 and further to 24.5% in 2019, signaling some recovery and the impact of government initiatives aimed at boosting employment. However, the global COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 significantly affected economies around the world, including Saudi Arabia, causing youth unemployment to rise to 27.51% that year. The disruptions from the pandemic, such as business closures and economic slowdowns, impacted job availability and hiring trends. Despite this setback, the recovery after the pandemic was strong, with youth unemployment falling to 19.78% in 2021. This decline was likely fueled by economic stimulus measures, labor market reforms, and increased job opportunities in emerging industries. The positive trend continued into 2022, with unemployment decreasing further to 16%, reflecting the success of initiatives focused on workforce development, entrepreneurship, and private-sector job creation. However, in 2023, the unemployment rate saw a slight uptick to 16.25%, indicating stabilization in the labor market while also underscoring the need for ongoing efforts to maintain employment growth [47].



**Figure 6.** The changes in Saudi Arabia's youth unemployment rate over the past decade highlight the intricate relationship between economic policies, labor market conditions, and global influences.

The Vision 2030 strategy has been pivotal in influencing employment patterns by encouraging economic diversification, decreasing reliance on oil revenues, and improving workforce participation through initiatives like Saudization and skill development programs. Although the recent decline in youth unemployment is encouraging, continuous efforts are essential to sustain this progress, tackle structural issues, and ensure that young Saudis possess the skills and opportunities needed for lasting employment in a fast-changing economy.

#### *2.4. Future Outlook: HR and Workforce Evolution in Saudi Arabia*

Saudi Arabia is experiencing a significant transformation in its workforce and human resource management (HRM) landscape, propelled by the ambitious Vision 2030 initiative. This vision seeks to diversify the economy, lessen reliance on oil, and cultivate a knowledge-based society. The development of HR and workforce planning is crucial for reaching these objectives, emphasizing the integration of advanced technologies, the promotion of emerging industries, and the alignment of HR strategies with national goals.

#### *2.5. Role of AI and Automation in Workforce Planning*

Artificial intelligence (AI) and automation are transforming workforce planning in Saudi Arabia, presenting both opportunities and challenges. The National Strategy for Data and Artificial Intelligence, introduced in 2020, aims to establish Saudi Arabia as a global leader in AI by 2030, with investments of \$20 billion and the goal of training 20,000 AI and data specialists [48]. AI is projected to automate 41% of work activities in the Kingdom, especially in sectors that rely heavily on routine tasks, such as manufacturing [49]. However, this transition is not just about replacing human workers; it's also about enhancing human capabilities. For example, AI-driven tools like ChatGPT improve productivity and decision-making, allowing employees to concentrate on more valuable tasks. HR professionals are utilizing AI for recruitment, performance management, and employee development. Notably, 49% of organizations in Saudi Arabia are using AI to create tailored learning opportunities, while 46% depend on AI to establish performance goals. Despite these advancements, challenges such as the "alignment problem" (ensuring AI systems reflect human values) and the "containment problem" (preventing AI from operating outside its intended purpose) need to be tackled to guarantee the ethical and responsible integration of AI [50].

#### *2.6. Emerging Industries and Their Demand for New Skills*

The diversification of Saudi Arabia's economy under Vision 2030 has sparked the growth of new industries like renewable energy and fintech, which require specialized skills. The Kingdom is making substantial investments in renewable energy projects, such as solar and wind power, to lower its carbon footprint and establish sustainable energy sources. Likewise, the fintech sector is expanding quickly, fueled by digital transformation and the integration of blockchain and AI technologies [50]. These emerging industries need a workforce proficient in areas like data analytics, cybersecurity, and advanced engineering. However, there is a notable skills gap in the local labor market. To tackle this issue, HR departments are partnering with educational institutions to ensure that curricula meet industry demands and are providing internships and apprenticeships to connect education with employment [51]. Moreover, upskilling and reskilling initiatives are being introduced to equip the current workforce for these new positions. For example, 62% of employees in Saudi Arabia view a company's commitment to upskilling as a crucial factor in their choice to join or remain with an organization. HR departments are adopting strategies to attract, develop, and retain local talent, which includes creating appealing career paths and promoting inclusive workplaces [52]. Additionally, HR is leading digital transformation efforts within organizations, ensuring employees have the skills necessary to succeed in an AI-driven economy. This involves utilizing AI tools for workforce analytics, improving employee engagement through digital platforms, and encouraging a culture of continuous learning [53]. The strategic importance of HR is further highlighted by its role in leadership development, which is essential for managing the complexities of economic diversification and technological progress.

The future of HR and workforce evolution in Saudi Arabia is marked by swift technological advancements, the emergence of new industries, and a strong alignment with Vision 2030 goals. AI and automation are reshaping workforce planning, while new sectors are generating a need for specialized skills. HR is leading these transformations, promoting Saudization, encouraging innovation, and ensuring the workforce is ready for the challenges and opportunities ahead. By embracing these trends, Saudi Arabia is well-equipped to meet its Vision 2030 objectives and establish itself as a global leader in technology and innovation.

### **3. Conclusion**

Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 represents more than just a set of economic reforms; it is a profound transformation that touches every aspect of the Kingdom's workforce. At the heart of this vision is a commitment to building a thriving, dynamic, and sustainable labor market—one that empowers Saudi citizens, fosters innovation, and embraces technological advancements. Over the past few years, the country has taken remarkable strides in reshaping its employment landscape. Digital HR solutions have revolutionized the way businesses operate, making processes more efficient and employee-driven. The increasing participation of Saudi women in the workforce marks a significant social and economic shift, paving the way for greater diversity and inclusivity in the workplace. Initiatives such as Saudization and targeted upskilling programs have also played a vital role in bridging employment gaps and ensuring that Saudi talent is at the forefront of the nation's growth.

However, this journey is not without its challenges. As businesses and employees adapt to new policies and technological advancements, they face inevitable hurdles—skills mismatches, concerns over automation, and the ever-present challenge of balancing economic expansion with workforce sustainability. Change fatigue is a real issue, as workers and organizations navigate the rapid shifts in labor market expectations. Addressing these concerns requires a thoughtful approach, one that

prioritizes continuous learning, career development, and well-being. Despite these challenges, there is reason for optimism. The government's dedication to fostering strong public-private partnerships, along with collaborations with international organizations such as the International Labor Organization (ILO), has created a solid foundation for future growth. By investing in human capital, businesses are not only strengthening their workforce but also ensuring long-term economic resilience. Companies that embrace employee-centric strategies—focusing on engagement, empowerment, and inclusivity—will be the ones that thrive in the new era of work.

Yet, beyond the numbers and policies, the true essence of this transformation lies in its impact on people. A young graduate finding meaningful employment, a woman stepping into a leadership role for the first time, or an employee gaining new skills through digital learning—these are the real markers of progress. The success of Vision 2030 will ultimately be measured not just in economic statistics but in the opportunities it creates for individuals to grow, contribute, and succeed in a rapidly changing world.

As Saudi Arabia moves forward, the focus must remain on building a workforce that is adaptable, skilled, and inspired. By fostering a culture of innovation, inclusivity, and lifelong learning, the Kingdom is not just preparing for the future; it is actively shaping it. The journey of workforce transformation is ongoing, and while there is much work to be done, the progress so far is a testament to what can be achieved when vision, strategy, and people come together in pursuit of a shared goal.

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